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ABSTRACT

Many questions accompany the recognition of different dialects, including questions concerning the origin of the speaker, the reasons why people speak the way they do, and which way of speaking is correct. Strong feelings may accompany the recognition of dialects, and assessments and classifications of people may be made based on how they speak. This booklet provides information that addresses many of the recurring questions underlying the recognition of dialects, ranging from questions asked out of curiosity to those asked as a basis for making an essential educational decision about a child's future. Some of the specific issues addressed are the following: (1) the origin of language differences and the main differences between dialects of English; (2) language standards and especially "standard English" in relation to certain groups of children who have been termed "disadvantaged"; (3) the consequences of dialects in education and problems related to dealing with them; and (4) dialect differences and the broader community, including the question of eliminating differences among patterns of speech. A list of references is included. (Author/AMH)

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DIALECTS AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Dialogue on Dialects

Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian

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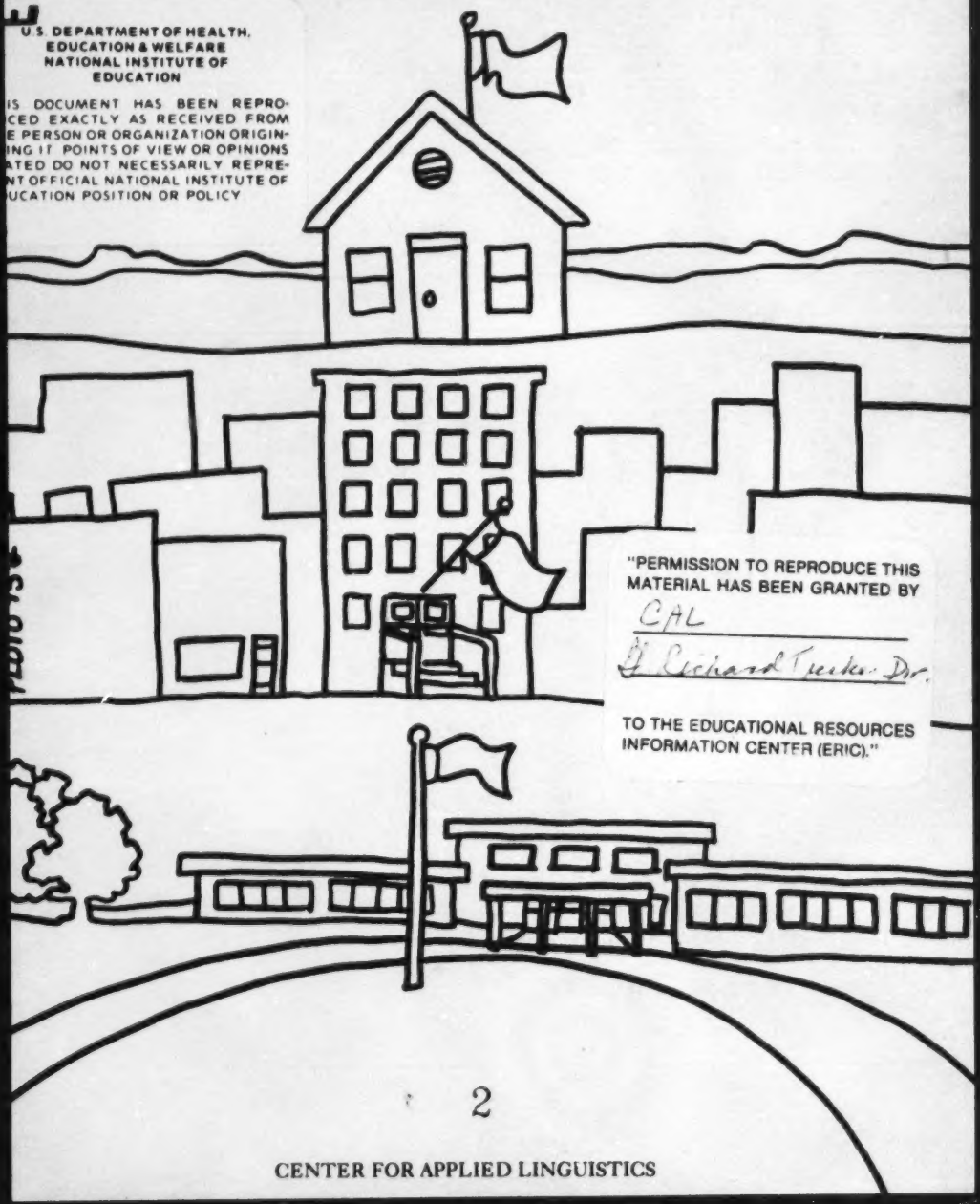

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Dialects and Educational Equity

Language inevitably plays a central role in education. It is used as a means of transmitting information and is an essential ingredient in the development and evaluation of particular educational skills. In addition, language is a vehicle of social identification as people react to one another based on the way they speak. The importance of language in education, coupled with its social significance, makes it a key factor in the struggle for educational equity.

Over the past two decades, a great deal of research has been undertaken on language diversity in American English, particularly among the economically impoverished and ethnically and socially isolated members of our society—those groups who speak what has been labeled "nonstandard English." Research on these varieties has raised some fundamental social and educational issues—matters that cannot be ignored by those vested with the responsibility of educating ***all*** students. ***Dialects and Educational Equity*** attempts to address some of these issues on the basis of what is currently known about language variation.

Our concern is the dissemination of information relevant to the needs of practitioners, and the format of this series is designed to highlight this orientation. Each booklet is arranged in a question-answer format, with the questions representing the kinds of issues raised by practitioners in surveys, workshops, and discussion groups and the answers based on current research information addressing the concerns. The first two booklets, ***Dialogue on Dialects*** and ***Exploring Dialects***, address preliminary concerns about dialect differences while the booklets, ***Speech Pathology and Dialect Differences***, ***Reading and Dialect Differences***, and ***Language Arts and Dialect Differences***, address more specialized educational issues. At the end of each discussion in the booklets, certain other readings are suggested for those who may wish to pursue more information on a particular topic.

Practitioners and researchers in the areas of specialization considered have guided the development of these publications from the initial planning to the final products. In addition, staff consultants at the Center for Applied Linguistics, Roger W. Shuy and Peter A. Eddy, advised on many phases of the project. Lance Potter, of our staff, researched many topics of relevance, and Marlene Zack attended to the fine details of typing the original booklets. Finally, Diane Bartosh, of the Publications Program at the Center for Applied Linguistics, developed the layout and edited the final manuscript. Our appreciation is extended to these individuals, as well as the many anonymous practitioners who originally brought our attention to the issues raised here.

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Preface

Curiosity about dialects is inevitable. We can't help but wonder about different pronunciations of words or different word usage. As Ivy put it in *Grapes of Wrath*, "I knowed you wasn't Oklahomy folks. You talk queer kinda—That ain't no blame, you understan'." Many questions accompany our recognition of different dialects: *Where is that person from? Why do people speak the way they do? Which is the correct way of speaking?*

The significance of recognizing different dialects goes beyond simple curiosity. Along with the recognition of dialects may go strong feelings about the character of people. Educators sometimes make assessments and classifications based on how students speak; employers make placement and hiring decisions based on listening to how people talk. The ramifications of dialect differences, then, are of no small consequence.

Because of the possible significance of dialect differences, it is important to understand some of the basic issues that revolve around them. This booklet provides the kind of information that addresses many of the recurring questions underlying the recognition of dialects. The questions addressed here represent those asked by people in a range of contexts—from those asked out of curiosity at a casual social gathering to those asked as a basis for making an essential educational decision about a child's future.

We are indebted to a number of specific people who commented on a preliminary version of this booklet, as well as to those who first contributed to the questions represented here. In particular, Ralph Fasold (Georgetown University), Roger W. Shuy (Center for Applied Linguistics), Bill Levine (Howard County School System), Anne Moughon (Georgia State Department of Education), and Jessie Roderick (University of Maryland) made helpful recommendations on our earlier draft.

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DIALECTS

The topic of dialects has received considerable attention recently—in newspapers, on television, and in schools. It's not always clear, however, what is meant by "Dialects." What does the term *DIALECT refer to?*

The term "dialect" is actually used in several different ways. One is a technical meaning used by students of language and, within this group, there is general agreement on what this term means.

In the technical meaning, *dialect* refers to any given variety of a language shared by a group of speakers. These varieties usually correspond to differences of other types between the groups, such as geographical location, social class, or age. People who share important social and regional characteristics will typically speak quite similarly, and those who do not will often differ in their language as well. The definition is not a rigorous one, but it carries an important implication. In this technical use of the term, the relative status of a dialect with respect to other dialects of the language (its "social position") is irrelevant. The term used this way is completely neutral—there is no evaluation implied, either positive or negative.

For example, a difference between English dialects has been found in the use of *anymore*. Some dialects require that *anymore* be used only in negative sentences like *Houses in this neighborhood aren't cheap anymore.* In other dialects, it can also occur in positive sentences like *Houses in this neighborhood are expensive anymore.* This difference usually corresponds to regional characteristics. The important point here is that neither use is right or wrong although some dialects contain a restriction on *anymore* (only in negative sentences) that others do not have. According to the technical meaning of dialect, one pattern is not "better" than another.

A second significant consequence of the technical meaning of dialect is that *you cannot speak a language without speakng a dialect of that language.* Everyone is part of some group which can be distinguished from other groups, and one of these groupings depends on how you talk. In other words, *if you speak the English language, you necessarily speak some dialect of the English language.*

How does the non-technical use of "dialect" differ from the technical meaning?

There are several popular ways in which the term *dialect* is used, each differing to some degree from the technical meaning. One of the most common uses of the term carries a negative connotation, unlike the neutral, technical meaning. "Dialect" is sometimes used to refer to a particular social or geographical variety of English which is not the "standard" one. For example, a native midwesterner might say "That person speaks a dialect" after hearing the speech of a Black from the deep South or a rural Appalachian White. This use of the term also assumes that only certain groups of people speak a dialect. These implications are unwarranted since everyone speaks some variety—or dialect—of their language, and any evaluation of relative merit is based on social, not linguistic, grounds.

The label is also sometimes used as a synonym of "language." For example, you might hear someone say "There are many African dialects" or "American Indians speak a large number of different dialects." In reality, a distinction between separate languages can be made, and this use of "dialect" usually occurs only when the speaker is unfamiliar with the situation and languages being talked about. For example, someone who might make the above statements would probably not say "There are many dialects spoken in Europe," in reference to the different languages in Europe.

Students of a language often object to the popular usage of "dialect" because of this negative sense it carries and the different interpretations that are possible. Sometimes, terms like *language variety, language difference,* or *linguistic diversity* are used to convey the technical sense so that misinterpretations from the different uses of the term "dialect" can be avoided.

What about the term *ACCENT*? Is there a special meaning for that, too?

When it comes to language differences, the term *accent* is usually used to refer to how people pronounce words. So, if a person pronounces *car* without the final *r*, as in *cah*, or *creek* something like *crick*, someone might refer to this as characteristic of a particular accent. The reference to accent may include differences other than pronunciation, but the focus is usually on pronunciation.

Several situations in which the term "accent" might occur can illustrate more clearly how it is used. These occurrences also give a basis for comparing what is meant by "accent" with the uses of "dialect."

(a) A French waiter asks some diners what they would like to order. His question is English, but the pronunciation sounds as if he were using French rather than English sounds. The patron might remark, "That waiter has a very heavy accent."

(b) Someone who grew up in northeastern New England visits Chicago. The native Chicagoan might observe "That person has a real New England accent."

(c) Someone originally from Chicago visits northeastern New England. The New Englander might observe "That person from Chicago says some words with a real strong accent."

The first situation involves someone who presumably learned English as a second language and still shows influence from the native language. This is the classic "foreign accent" which might be more specifically labeled as a "French accent," "Swedish accent," etc. The other situations—(b) and (c)—contain references to differences within a language. In this respect, "accent" is closer to the term "dialect" we just discussed. Of course, it is more restricted in that "accent" refers primarily to pronunciation and there are differences other than pronunciation among dialects.

The term "accent" carries some implications like those for the popular use of dialect, but they are typically less severe. Although each variety includes its own peculiar pronunciation pattern of English, the assumption is often made that only "other people" have accents. Thus, the native Chicagoan meeting someone from New England may think it is only the New Englander who speaks with an accent, while the native New Englander meeting the Chicagoan may think that it is only the Chicagoan who speaks with an accent. In reality, of course, both of them "have an accent" just as everyone speaks a dialect. Although there are sometimes negative connotations associated with "having an accent," there can be positive evaluations as well. For instance, many North Americans hold a "British accent" in high regard.

So, differences between dialects can be found in the way things are pronounced. What other kinds of language differences are there?

Dialects or language varieties may differ from each other at several levels in addition to pronunciation. One fairly obvious difference is in vocabulary items. The use of a term like *tonic* in some regions of New England to refer to what in other regions is

called *pop*, *soda pop*, or simply *soda* is a basic vocabulary variation. The retention of the term *icebox* by older generations where the younger generation may use *refrigerator* also reflects this level of difference.

Dialects also vary from each other in the grammatical patterns of the language system—the way items combine to form sentences. For example, different ways of forming an indirect question such as *He asked could he go to the movies* versus *He asked if he could go to the movies* or different negative patterns such as *He didn't do anything* versus *He didn't do nothing* reflect basic grammatical alternatives. In some dialects, both alternatives are used; in others, only one is found.

The extent of variation in our language is not limited to the form of particular items. It is also possible for varieties to differ in how particular forms are used in the context of speech interaction. Thus, a northerner and a southerner may both be familiar with the respect terms *sir* and *ma'am* but use them in varying situations. The different social rules governing respect and familiarity may be reflected in language rules for the use of these forms. Such differences in language use, often related to social and cultural differences, are sometimes hard to pinpoint, but they can be highly sensitive areas of difference between groups.

Where do language differences come from?

Language differences ultimately reflect basic behavior differences between groups of people. There may be diverse reasons underlying differences in language, but they all lead to this basic principle. Given physical or social separation of one type or another, language differences can be expected to follow. Also, as language changes (and it is always changing), differences between groups emerge as they follow different paths.

In the United States, both physical and social facts are responsible for the variation in English. Many of the regional differences in American English can be traced to combinations of physical factors in the country's history and geography. Some patterns can be explained by looking at settlement history, which reveals the patterns of the early settlers. The movement of the population, historically and currently, also has a bearing on the language of regions, since differences can be expected to coincide with the major drifts of the population. Finally, characteristics of physical geography must be considered. Natural barriers such as mountains and rivers have historically cut off people from each other, creating a natural basis for differences to emerge and be maintained.

Many social factors are also responsible for much of the diversity in ways of speaking. Class and status distinctions found in our society are often reflected in language differences as well. We would certainly expect that the greater the social distance between groups, the greater the language differences. This principle doesn't always work exactly, but it is a reasonably accurate reflection of how language differences can be expected to reflect group behavior differences.

When we consider the general principle that differences between groups correlate with language differences, it seems reasonable enough to expect that a lawyer from the deep South will speak considerably differently from a northern working-class person, or a White Appalachian farmer in an isolated mountain area will speak differently from a Black California business executive. Notice that the characterization includes historical, geographical, social, and ethnic factors, all of which have been prominent in distinguishing groups of individuals from each other in American society. The same distinctions are important in understanding language differences.

If we eliminated some of the social differences between groups of Americans, would it follow that language differences would be eliminated?

Based on the understanding of how dialects came about to begin with, we would certainly expect that language differences would be minimized if differences between groups of Americans were minimized. To a certain extent, however, this question is purely academic. Geographic dispersion is unavoidable, given a population of over 200 million. And, although we certainly strive to eliminate social inequalities, social and ethnic differences are a part of the history which makes up this country's heritage. We can safely predict that none of us will be here to witness the day when differences in American English no longer exist.

What are the main differences between dialects of English?

Dialects vary at all the levels of language difference discussed earlier. Studies of various dialect groups indicate that regional dialects tend to be distinguished by pronunciation and vocabulary features, while social dialects show variation in these areas as well as in grammatical usage. We might guess that someone was from Massachusetts if they pronounced the word spelled *idea* with an *r* sound at the end (*idear*) and "dropped" the *r* on a word like *car* (*cah*). Many of these pronunciation differences concern the vowel sounds in words. For instance, southern regional dialects often vary from others in the way they pronounce words with vowel glides, like *line* or *ride*. People from these areas would most likely say something like *lahn* or *rahd*, where people from, say, northern areas would pronounce them with the glide. Other pronunciation variants involve particular words, rather than sets of words. *Route* for some people rhymes with *boot*; for others, with *bout*. These pronunciation differences are typically what is referred to as "accent," as we saw above. Regional dialects also differ in the words they use to refer to certain things. Depending on what part of the country you were in, for instance, you would need to order a *submarine*, a *hoagie*, or a *grinder* to get a particular kind of sandwich. Water might be obtained through a *faucet*, a *tap*, or a *spigot*, children would *favor* or *resemble* one of their parents. These alternative vocabulary items are readily noticed and commented on when speakers from different regions meet.

Social dialects not only show variation in vocabulary items and pronunciation features, they also often have differences in areas of grammar. A member of a poor rural farming community might say *You was right* and *I done it* while a middle-class office worker might use *You were right* and *I did it*, meaning the same thing. These variations around the verb are typical of some of the more frequent grammatical differences between dialects. These affect the systems for relating subjects to verbs (i.e. agreement patterns) and for choosing a form of the verb for a particular tense.

How many different dialects of American English are there?

There is no widely agreed upon answer to this question, even after decades of research on differences in American English. We can talk, as we have, about the many differences in the speech patterns of different groups of people, but deciding where one dialect ends and another begins and how many there are is a different matter. Dialects simply do not come in neat little self-contained packages, and many factors, of varying degrees of importance, must be considered.

There have been some attempts to delineate dialect groups by region. Students

of regional dialects generally recognize several major dialect areas in the U.S. and a number of sub-areas within them. Although many cautions are given about the lines of demarcation and the importance of different lines, the map of dialects (from *Discovering American Dialects* by Roger W. Shuy) is representative of a fairly common pattern of dialect demarcation. This map just gives a regional distribution, however. Within and across areas, there are social, ethnic, age, and sex considerations as well, which will, of course, complicate the picture immensely.

Suggested Readings

Many introductory linguistics and sociolinguistics texts discuss the concept of dialect from a linguistic perspective, such as Joshua Fishman's *Sociolinguistics*. In *Discovering American Dialects*, Roger Shuy discusses specifically the regional dialects of our country, how they arose, and how they spread. This provides a good introduction to dialects in a familiar context. Chapter Four of Walt Wolfram and Ralph Fasold's *The Study of Social Dialects in American English* looks closely at the social factors underlying dialect differences. For a collection of observations about different dialect features, the volume edited by Juanita Williamson and Virginia Burke, *A Various Language*, provides a good selection. *Exploring Dialects*, the second booklet in this series, also gives a summary of features that have been found in both social and regional dialects.

LANGUAGE STANDARDS

Even though there are many dialects of English, isn't there just one way of speaking English that is generally recognized as correct?

There are numerous dialects within the English language. (In the last section, we talked only about U.S. English—imagine if we tried to include England, Australia, and other countries where English is spoken.) However, there is no *one* correct way to speak English, in the sense that one set of language patterns is somehow inherently

better than all the others. In terms of what is generally recognized, there are certain language patterns that are preferred over others, according to social norms. These are often talked about as the "correct" use of English, but this is actually a decision based on social, not linguistic, acceptability.

"Correct" is a judgment that we make, typically based on some objective set of information. For example, the result of an addition problem, like 7 plus 3, has one correct solution (10) and all others are incorrect (11, 9, etc.). In arithmetic, we can assume that there will be one, and only one, correct answer. To compare this with language use, we must look for a set of objective facts against which we might judge whether something in language is correct or incorrect.

One set of facts we might be able to depend on is our ability to decide what can and cannot count as English. So, for example, when we hear a sentence like *They will arrive tomorrow*, we can observe that it is English and therefore in that sense "correct." On the other hand, we would know that *Arrive will tomorrow they* or *Ils arriveront demain* are both "incorrect" as English sentences in that sense, although the latter would qualify for another language. Similarly, we would judge *pencil* to be a correct form of English, but *tloshg* would not be accepted. In each case, we seem to be identifying things that speakers of English might say as opposed to everything else. This is based on our knowledge of the English language. This is one set of objective facts which we share as speakers of English.

When it comes to ways of saying things that are not shared by all speakers of English, the notion of "correct" becomes quite controversial. This can easily be seen by asking someone about sentences like *I done it wrong* or *I can't see nothing*. It is clear that these are both possible sentences or English—when someone says a sentence like this, we wouldn't want to claim that they weren't speaking English. In this sense, then, these are both "correct" English sentences, in contrast with non-English. However, if you ask someone about them, chances are that you'll hear that they aren't "good" or "correct" English. This observation is a judgment where correctness is determined by acceptability, rather than accuracy or intrinsic worth. There is no real basis, in terms of objective facts, for determining whether *I did it wrong* or *I done it wrong* is a better way to convey that information. It's not like an arithmetic problem, where only one answer is right. It is not possible, then, to identify just one way of speaking English as the "correct" way. The socially unacceptable forms, like *I done it*, are often termed "nonstandard" features, to contrast them with "standard" versions, or those that conform to social norms. These norms are based on judgments of acceptability rather than assessments of correctness.

Where do judgments of acceptability in language come from?

Judgments about sentences like *I did it* versus *I done it* are based on our attitudes about our language and the different groups of people who speak it. The value placed on a certain way of saying something is very closely associated with the social status of the people who say it that way. This is not an individual decision made by each person; it is the society's evaluation of different groups that includes their ways of speaking. As we are socialized, we learn these attitudes just as we learn what constitutes polite behavior, like not talking with your mouth full of food. This common set of beliefs about our language is shared by most members of our society. Speakers from groups whose dialects are not considered highly by society are usually aware of this evaluation and feel that their language is not as good as other people's. The use of "correct" in terms of this social evaluation, then, does not involve real value or assessment by any objective standard. What is acceptable according to the standards

of society at large is considered "correct"; what is not acceptable will be looked on as "incorrect."

Are some dialects more logical than others?

No. Very often we hear that a particular English dialect is preferred because it is "more logical" than some other dialect that has nonstandard features. The quality of being "logical," we assume, relates to being able to express various logical concepts using the means available in a dialect. These concepts include relationships like negation or conditionality (i.e. *if . . . then*), as well as the process of linking expressions in sequence in a so-called "logical" manner. The idea that some dialects are more logical than others results from the influence of language attitudes, like the concept of "correct" language. Believing that standard forms of English are somehow inherently better than others, many people will go on to maintain that certain linguistic structures are more logical than others, more systematic, even more advantageous for cognitive development. There is no evidence, however, to support the contention that any language variety will interfere with the development of the ability to reason, or the ability to express logical concepts. All languages—and dialects of languages—adequately provide for the conceptualization and expression of logical propositions, but the particular manner of this expression may differ among language systems.

What about the use of double negatives? Isn't that illogical?

The use of so-called "double negatives," or two negative forms in a single sentence, is often cited as evidence that a particular variety is illogical. According to this argument, the two negatives in a sentence like *They can't go nowhere* should cancel each other so that the meaning should be a positive statement (*They can go somewhere*). Since sentences like this are used with a negative interpretation, the claim is made that the structure is illogical. (According to this position, *Nobody can't go nowhere*, with three negatives, would have to be accepted as a negative sentence.) However, the natural logic of language users is not identical to formal mathematic logic, where two negatives do yield a positive. Natural logic allows both sentences, *They can't go anywhere* and *They can't go nowhere*, to have a negative interpretation, depending on the conventions of the particular dialect. Both are expressions of the logical concept of negation; the singly negated form is socially acceptable, the doubly negated form is not. It is interesting to note that multiple negation has been an acceptable structure in English in the past, during the Old English and Middle English periods. The change to favoring the use of a single negative in a sentence like *They can't do anything* is a relatively recent development. In the French language, the use of two negative words (*ne . . . pas*) is the current standard for making a negative utterance, as in *je ne sais pas*, "I don't know."

But aren't some dialects simpler versions of others?

No again. Dialects of a language are related to one another in patterned ways. When these patterns are examined, we can see how intricate and complex the features of any dialect are. The comparison of varieties of a language will show each having areas of greater and lesser complexity in relation to the others.

A closely related idea is that people who use dialects with nonstandard features are reflecting incomplete learning of the standard dialect. This is also untrue. Common phrases used to describe certain features reinforce this notion, such as "leaving off the

endings of words," or "not using complete sentences." The English speakers who are said to "leave off the endings of words" are really using a pronunciation rule that all English speakers use. All speakers of English will, in casual speech, sometimes pronounce a word like *fast* as *fas'*, "leaving off" the final *t*, as in *fas'break*. If you listen carefully to the speech of those around you, you'll probably notice this rule in use to varying degrees. It's not sloppy speech at all, it's just one of the pronunciation rules of English that happens more often in casual speech.

This rule of English is used somewhat differently in certain dialects, and so it is often noticed and commented on by speakers of other dialects. One difference is that it is used more often in general, so the higher frequency makes it noticeable. Also, *fast* can be pronounced *fas'* in a situation like *fas' or slow*, where the absence of the *t* sound is noticeable because of the vowel at the beginning of the next word. The quality of "leaving off endings of words" is really a case of a rule of English that is used with minor, but noticeable, differences by different groups, but it is not restricted to any one group. The pattern of relationship between varieties can be described according to these differences in the way the rule works, but it is not at all a question of "simpler versions."

Certain groups of children have been referred to as "disadvantaged." Often, people talk about "cultural disadvantage" and "linguistic disadvantage," which would seem to mean that these children need help with their language. If the dialects aren't less logical, or simpler, what's the problem?

The term "linguistically disadvantaged" is a misnomer in the way it is typically used. As we have seen, no variety of a language is inherently better than another; none is less logical or less complex than others. Therefore, no speakers have a disadvantage in their ability to function as a result of the variety of the language that they acquire.

The reality of the social situation in this country cannot be denied, however. In many ways, culturally and linguistically different groups are at a disadvantage because of their less favored status within society. The *social* disadvantage is a product of the fact that these groups are viewed as lacking in certain areas (the so-called "cognitive" or "environmental handicap"). Therefore, they must change in order to be accepted. Success in school, for example, may depend on their being able to change their language and cultural behavior and adapt to school norms. For the member of a mainstream group, no change or adaptation is necessary. In this sense, culturally different groups may be considered "at a disadvantage" although they are not intrinsically "disadvantaged."

This view seems very different from what most people have said. Is this now the generally accepted position about these different groups?

There are two major schools of thought on questions relating to groups that differ linguistically and culturally from mainstream society. Briefly, they can be referred to as the *deficit* position and the *difference* position. In terms of language, proponents of the "deficit" position believe that speakers of dialects with nonstandard forms have a handicap, not only socially, but cognitively, because the dialects are "illogical," or

sloppy, or possess various other negative qualities. Intelligence test scores and results of other standardized measures are often cited as evidence for this position. (Problems of bias in testing are typically not addressed.) Based on these test scores, recommendations are often made for remedial language training and other treatments. The concept of "compensatory education" evolved from this position, where education programs were designed to fill in the gaps in language and other skills caused by the students' linguistic and environmental handicaps. According to this position, then, speakers of nonmainstream dialects have a language deficit that can impede their cognitive and social development.

The other position, and the one advocated here, views various groups of speakers in terms of the differences in their language systems. Since no one system can be shown to be inherently better, there is no reason to assume that using a particular dialect can be associated with having any kind of deficit or advantage. The evidence from test scores and school performance that is called on to support the need for remediation should be examined more closely. If you assume that a particular dialect is best, if you accept and encourage only that dialect during the education process and if you also test ability and achievement through the medium of that dialect, then it should not be surprising that students who enter school already speaking it tend to fare better than those who use a different dialect. According to the "difference" position, the equality and inherent adequacy of the functioning dialects should be accepted, and an understanding of the attitudes and values of society toward the dialects and their speakers is needed in order to deal with them. The U.S. situation is in no way unique, by the way. The acceptance of a standard language accompanied by negative attitudes toward the other language varieties is an unavoidable product of the interaction of language and society.

The topic of standard English seems to be quite controversial, especially in education, but it's often not clear what is meant by the term. What does the term *STANDARD ENGLISH* refer to?

There is really no single dialect of English that corresponds to a "standard" English, although the popular belief is that such a dialect exists in the speech of those who speak so-called "good" English. This belief is actually close to the truth, since the speech of a certain group of people does define what is considered standard in English. However, the norms are not identical in all communities, and there are two sets of norms that can be recognized—the *informal* standard and the *formal* standard.

The norms of language usage that members of a community consider to be acceptable constitute the "informal standard American English." This set of norms relates to the way certain people actually speak and allows variation between communities. "Formal standard English," on the other hand, includes the norms prescribed in grammar books and finds its reflection, if anywhere, in the written language. For example, the formal standard dictates that certain distinctions should be made in the use of *shall* and *will*, that one should avoid ending a sentence with a preposition, and so on. However, acceptable usage does not necessarily conform to these norms and informal standard English would admit sentences like *They're the ones you should depend on*, with no stigma attached, despite the final preposition. In fact, an utterance like *They are the ones on whom you should depend* is probably less acceptable in many circumstances because of its formality.

Does anyone speak standard English?

It is unlikely that anyone speaks the standard language, if the formal standard is used as a reference point. The formal standard is generally limited to the written language of certain people, so that it appears only in the most formal style of the highly educated, and probably older, members of society. The informal standard is spoken, however, by those whose language usage sets the guidelines for what is acceptable in each community.

Two observations need to be made about the informal standard. First, since all speakers control a range of styles, someone who is considered a standard English speaker may use particular language patterns that are clearly nonstandard. For example, in an appropriate situation, a standard speaker might use *ain't*, or *Fred and him went* . . . . This would not indicate that the speaker had become a speaker of a nonstandard dialect of English. Rather, it is a manifestation of a basic feature of language, the variability of its forms. Second, there is no one standard English according to this set of norms, but many different varieties that qualify as standard. For example, a standard speaker from Maine and a standard speaker from Tennessee would have quite different pronunciation patterns, and probably certain other differences as well. They would both be accepted as standard English speakers in their own communities, though, and in most others as well, despite the fact that their "accent" might be noticed outside their home region. Thus, there is a range of language patterns, particularly in the area of pronunciation, that is acceptable according to the informal norms, but there is also a unified notion of what is *not* acceptable that constitutes part of the informal standard for American English.

Who decides which dialects are standard and which are nonstandard?

In every society there are people whose position or status makes their judgments about language use more powerful than those of other people. This group includes those who make decisions that can significantly affect the lives of others, including, for example, teachers and employers in our society. These are the people who decide who will be hired or who will progress in school; their judgments about what is good and bad in language enter into their evaluations of people, giving those judgments added weight. These are also the people who are looked up to by members of their community, whose opinions about matters like language would typically be respected. Their speech habits are admired and serve as a model of acceptability.

Standard American English, then, is a composite of the real spoken language of this group of professionals, the educated middle-class. Since members of this group in Chicago might sound quite different from their counterparts in Charleston, we need to recognize the existence of a number of dialects of standard American English. This informal set of norms is the one that really counts in terms of social acceptance. It is important, for this reason, to discriminate carefully between those artificial norms that make up the formal standard and the informal, influential norms of social acceptability.

Suggested Readings

For further information about the notion of standard English, see "Variations in Standard American English" by Raven McDavid which describes differences between standard English dialects both historically and currently. Also, any history of English, such as Thomas Pyles' *Origins and Development of the English Language*, will give a good view of how standard English has changed historically. The equality of dialects is

persuasively supported by William Labov in "The Logic of Nonstandard English," where he also argues against the verbal deficit position. For more extensive consideration of the "difference" and "deficit" positions, the collection of papers edited by Frederick Williams entitled *Language and Poverty* can be consulted.

DIALECT DIFFERENCES & EDUCATION

What are the consequences of dialects in education? Do they pose any problems?

Complex and controversial issues concerning dialects and education have been debated for quite a while, most intensely since the late 1960s. Because of the close relationship between minority and dialect groups, questions about the civil rights of the people involved have also come up in this regard. One central issue has been whether or not to require the use of a standard dialect in the course of education. Such a requirement is considered to be discriminatory by some, since it places an extra burden on certain groups and may mean they will not receive the same educational opportunity as other groups. An insistence on standard English forms may hinder the acquisition of other educational skills and make it more difficult for these students to succeed in school. Others argue that is is a responsibility of the education system to teach a standard dialect so that all groups will have a better chance for equal opportunity in later life. For instance, a lack of facility with standard English may cause problems for the adult in obtaining employment. Prospects for success in school and in later life, then, may be related to some of the attitudes society holds toward different dialects.

But doesn't everybody have to learn to speak better English in school? Why is it so hard for some groups?

There are aspects of schooling that deal with language skills, such as composition, and in that sense everyone studies language. Students also may develop a wider range of language styles in school. They may learn, for example, that ways of speaking used at home are not always appropriate for the classroom, when meeting people for the first time, etc. They may also increase the size of their vocabulary as they work through content area as well as language skill instruction. While this is not actually a question of learning to speak "better" English, there is certainly some development of language skills for educational and social purposes.

The reason it is "so hard" for some groups is that they don't necessarily start from the same base that others do in terms of the language and social habits that have been developed in the home community. Before they can progress through a school curriculum in this area, members of these groups must often develop a facility with certain standard dialect forms. Thus, these students have extra work to do simply because they don't have the same background as others.

Are there other ways in which dialect differences can affect education?

Yes. Dialect differences between groups of students can affect the quality of education received by the students in at least two ways. One area that has been wide-

ly discussed is the possibility that a child's dialect may interfere with the acquisition of various skills (such as reading) and information on which later success might depend. More subtle, and perhaps more crucial, are the social consequences of being a member of a different dialect group. The attitudes of teachers, school personnel, and other students can have a tremendous impact on the education process. Often, people who hear a nonstandard dialect make erroneous assumptions about the speaker's intelligence. When a teacher or other school official reacts in this way, the result can be very serious. Studies have shown that there can be a self-fulfilling prophecy in teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities. It is possible that, if a teacher underestimates a child's ability because of dialect differences, perhaps as a direct result, the child will do less well in that class. In some cases, students are "tracked" with the so-called slower groups, or even placed in special classes for the mentally handicapped because of their speech patterns. The child's self-concept may also be injured if negative opinions are encountered frequently. So, matters of educational and social equity are related to dialect differences.

Are all these problems caused by dialect alone? There seem to be other factors contributing to difficulties in the classroom beyond the way some students speak.

Linguistic differences between groups are just one factor in the larger context of cultural differences. Members of society's various groups tend to share a set of linguistic and cultural characteristics. (Culture is used here in the sense of patterns of behavior shared by members of a social group.) Not only ways of speaking, but values, attitudes toward education, conceptions of politeness, and virtually all socially determined features can vary from one group to the next. Mainstream groups are considered to exhibit socially acceptable behavior, both linguistically and culturally. Nonmainstream group members tend to diverge to some extent from the norms on both counts.

The classroom consequences of cultural differences are very similar to those caused by linguistic differences. Cultural attitudes affect the interactions of students with teachers and fellow students. There are numerous instances recorded where behaviors have been misinterpreted because of a cultural difference between teacher and student. For example, Native American children in the Southwest have been labeled as passive or nonverbal and have had their level of intelligence misjudged because they seem unresponsive in the classroom. According to the rules of their culture, however, they are behaving appropriately in that situation and a response or any real active participation would be impertinent or disrespectful. Others report instances of culture clashes in newly integrated classrooms. Black children sometimes get reprimanded for "blurting out" an answer before being called on, or humming and making other noises while working independently. Although these actions may reflect cultural patterns that are accepted and expected in the community, the teacher may see them as disrespectful and disobedient. Such cultural differences, like linguistic differences, present complex issues for classroom practice, and failure to recognize them can lead to educational inequity.

Shouldn't we be realistic about how the student needs to speak and behave in order to succeed in life? Aren't we do-

ing more of a disservice if we ignore the differences and pretend that they don't matter?

Being realistic about the social situation, in terms of being aware of the social factors at work, is important. Certainly, ignoring the differences and pretending they don't matter is not advisable. The specific course of action taken in response to the differences, though, depends on the beliefs and goals of the individual teacher, the school, and the community. There is really only one recommendation that can be made at a general level. Whatever decision is reached, the people involved should be aware of the facts of the language and culture situation and should have enough information to make a choice and understand its consequences. This includes our own and others' attitudes toward different varieties of English.

What are some of the alternatives?

There are three basic alternatives that can be identified, in terms of how a school program can deal with dialect differences: (a) *accommodate all dialects*, (b) *require that a dialect of standard English be learned and used*, or (c) *identify a position somewhere between (a) and (b).*

The first alternative, accommodating all dialects, is based on the belief that all dialects are equal and no one should be penalized because of their acquired dialect. This could mean that a conscious effort would be made to allow full use of a student's native dialect of English and it would form the base on which education could build. Special programs might be adopted and tested to lessen any interference from the native dialect in the acquisition of certain skills and information in the school setting.

The other extreme position that can be taken is to insist that a dialect of standard English be acquired and used in the school context. Support for this position comes from the belief that such a variety is needed for success in later life. Following this philosophy, special programs might be allowed to teach forms of standard English, but other programs would not need to be changed. The native dialect may be accepted outside school contexts or discouraged entirely (although presumably someone who is familiar with the social factors in the situation would not advocate the latter course). If standard English is required, but the native dialect is also accepted, then the goal being worked toward can be termed "bidialectalism" (like "bilingual"), referring to near equal facility with two dialects of English.

The third alternative falls between these two extremes, and is undoubtedly the direction most often followed. The native dialect is accepted for certain uses and a dialect of standard English is encouraged or demanded for other uses. For example, in terms of mastering certain skills in school, a plan like the following might be devloped. In recognition of the fact that most written language that will be encountered in life will be a standard variety, a student will be expected to develop the capability to read and write a standard English dialect. A student would not be required to eliminate the native dialect in speaking, but efforts would be made to work toward competence in dealing with the standard written forms of the language, both in reading them and in producing them in writing. In this way, the two (or more) dialects would be used by the student for different purposes, much in the same way that people use different styles of speaking for different situations. This is just one example of the type of compromise that can be reached between the first two positions.

Suggested Readings

Other booklets in this series treat specific areas of educational concern: *Speech Pathology and Dialect Differences, Reading and Dialect Differences, Language Arts and Dialect Differences.* They should be referred to for more extensive discussion of issues in each area. The consequences of teacher attitudes on students' performance are documented by R. Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson in *Pygmalion in the Classroom.* This "pygmalion effect," specifically in terms of language attitudes, is investigated by Frederick Williams et al in their report on "Ethnic Stereotyping and Judgments of Children's Speech." For further details on this phenomenon, these works should be consulted. Finally, the collection of articles in *A Pluralistic Nation,* edited by Margaret A. Lourie and Nancy Faires Conklin, includes a number of interesting papers that deal with linguistic and cultural differences and education issues. Many of the topics introduced in this section are discussed by the various authors included in this volume.

DIALECT DIFFERENCES & THE BROADER CONTEXT

Is information about dialect differences useful for people in areas outside education?

The issues arising over dialect differences in education are actually just a reflection of these issues in the broader social context. There are many different practical consequences of dialect differences, but the most pervasive issue is related to attitudes about language. A number of research studies focusing on language attitudes show that speakers of nonstandard dialects are generally held in low esteem. Furthermore, this low esteem is typically extended to other personal attributes, including morality, integrity, and intelligence. In other words, attitudes about language trigger a whole set of stereotypes and prejudices based on underlying social and ethnic differences. Since people readily recognize social and ethnic differences in language, it is crucial to promote accurate knowledge about the nature of dialect differences in all segments of our society.

One of the interesting aspects of recent studies of language attitudes is the young age at which such attitudes may be acquired. In fact, one study showed that children as young as three to five years of age were quite accurate in recognizing differences in language and made associations with other types of behavior on the basis of language differences. These findings are in line with research findings about the socialization of prejudice, which takes place very early in life and manifests itself in many different details of behavior.

Regardless of what linguists say, don't people have a right to have an opinion about what is good and bad English? After all, there are standards for good and bad manners, and people don't view them in terms of prejudice. Why can't good English be considered the same way?

No one can really argue with a person's preference for one dialect over another, and such preferences do not in themselves create problems. The problems arise from

the interpretation of the significance of dialect differences. If the preference of one dialect is accompanied by an understanding that this choice does not imply inherent individual or social superiority, and that dialect differences are unrelated to matters of morality and intelligence, then no argument can be made with such a choice. What linguists object to is the unwarranted interpretation of differences in terms of negative stereotypes and prejudices.

Judgments concerning language preference are similar to judgments about other kinds of preferred manners, but they are also different in some important ways. A fork may be preferred to a spoon in eating peas, just as the form *isn't* may be preferred over *ain't*, but in the former case, no one would argue that there is greater nutritional value, or even that it is more efficient, to eat peas with a fork. In the case of language, however, traditional values about language usage often involve judgments about adequacy and efficiency in communication; they are not limited to simple preferences. In a sense, this is akin to saying that there is greater nutritional value in eating peas with a fork.

Linguists seem to give the impression that anything people say is okay. Is this really true?

There are several dimensions to the question of "being okay," from a linguistic viewpoint, that need to be clarified. Linguists typically maintain that all dialects have rules which govern the patterns of speech, and, as long as people follow the rules of their dialect, they are "talking okay." From a technical linguistic perspective, then, acceptable speech is defined as that which follows the linguistic rules of the dialect.

To say that something is linguistically okay does not necessarily mean that it is socially acceptable. A form like *We was here* might be governed by a linguistic rule in a particular dialect, but it is not preferred as a standard English form. Linguists are aware of this fact and often have their own social preferences about speech. But the social preference is clearly distinguished from a linguistic assessment of acceptability made in terms of language rules.

The dimensions of linguistic and social acceptability also relate to how the label "ungrammatical" is used. As linguists use the term, it is reserved for those cases in which structures do not follow the rules of a particular dialect. So, the sentence *We was here* would be considered **grammatical** in this definition since it follows the rules of a particular dialect, even if it does not follow the rules of the standard variety. A sentence such as *I bought a hat yellow* would be considered **ungrammatical**, however, since it does not follow the rules in any particular dialect of English. This technical definition of grammatical and ungrammatical structures should be distinguished from the popular use of the terms in which ungrammatical usually refers to socially unacceptable sentences, such as *We was here*. From the standpoint of describing language, it seems essential to separate linguistic and social acceptability.

The impression about the "linguistic position" with respect to what is "okay" in language use is true in the technical sense of "okay"; that is, forms are acceptable and grammatical as long as they follow the regular rules of a particular dialect. However, in most cases, this observation is made without distinguishing between linguistic and social acceptability.

After all is said and done, we still have dialect differences, and they are associated with various social differences. Wouldn't it be simpler if the dialect differences were just leveled, and everyone spoke the same way? At least then

we could eliminate some of the prejudices associated with dialect differences, couldn't we?

Dialect differences are a fact of life in our diverse society. As long as there are socially and regionally differentiated groups, these differences will be maintained. So any expectation that dialect differences might be eliminated is unrealistic given the facts of social structure. Furthermore, the expectation of uniformity is contrary to the varied traditions which have contributed this country's make-up. The possibility of leveling of dialect differences would also depend on a desire on the part of speakers of different dialects for this to take place. As it turns out, this is certainly not the case. Despite the high esteem associated with standard English on a superficial level, there is research supporting the conclusion that dialect differences are viewed positively on a deeper level. For example, positive values of forthrightness, physical prowess (i.e. "toughness"), and ethnic and social identity may be tied up with different nonstandard dialects.

What about the effect of mass media on dialects? Don't these really have a leveling effect on them, so that they reduce the differences between the varieties?

The effect of the mass media on dialect differences is difficult to determine. For the most part, however, individuals are not prone to use "media language," such as that of national newscasters or journalists, as a model for their own speech. They may recognize it as different, but not as a model to emulate. This is partly due to the fact that they are not in direct social contact with the writers for the print media and the speakers in the broadcast media (radio and television). There is little point in adjusting your speech to match that of a television newscaster if they will never know you did it. This lack of direct social contact makes the mass media much less influential than other peer group members that an individual speaker interacts with frequently.

There are also aspects of media language usage which may actually reinforce the usefulness of dialect differences. Some personalities may project a regional and/or ethnic dialect as a positive attribute through the media. When they appear or are reported on in print or in the broadcast media, the dialect they use receives favorable attention. And, on a local level, the use of regional and ethnic dialects may be directly programmed to appeal to a local population. Local radio "soul stations" are an example of this programming. So, the effect of the media with respect to dialect differences is certainly not uniform.

Haven't some of the major dialects leveled to some extent in the past generation? Don't people in America actually talk more alike now than they did, say, 50 years ago?

The examination of dialect differences across different generations does show some leveling between dialects. Older representatives of different social, regional, and ethnic varieties tend to differ more in their speech than the younger generation. The exact cause of this is hard to determine, although increased education, greater accessibility to regionally isolated areas, and expanded occupational opportunities have all played some role. It is probably a combination of factors rather than one primary reason which accounts for this leveling.

While some dialect differences have lessened, this should not be taken to mean that we can predict the extinction of English dialects. There is every reason to believe that different dialects will continue to be maintained. In the long run, these differences

are a tribute to the various traditions and heritages which have combined to make up the dialects of English.

Suggested Readings

Although the literature base dealing with dialects in other contexts is much less extensive than that for educational topics, there are some references that would provide interesting reading. The question of language attitudes is considered from a number of perspectives in the volume edited by Roger Shuy and Ralph Fasold entitled *Language Attitudes: Current Trends and Prospects*. The consequences of these attitudes are addressed directly by Ian Hancock in "Identity, Equality and Standard Language" where he argues that no one should be denied full participation in education or access to employment as a result of their linguistic background. The early age at which language attitudes are acquired is revealed in the research by Marilyn Rosenthal reported on in *The Magic Boxes: Children and Black English*. Finally, for anyone interested in a more in-depth discussion of a particular dialect, J.L. Dillard's *Black English* is a very readable treatment of both the educational and social ramifications of speaking Black English.

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